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Bilingual Counseling Students Developing Cultural and Language Competence in Mexico

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Abstract

Scholars have recently called for a greater research focus on bilingual counselor education and training. This study aims to explore the impact and development of study abroad immersion experiences on Latine bilingual counseling students. This study used transcendental phenomenological research to explore the lived experiences of bilingual counselors (N = 7) during a 2-week study abroad program in Oaxaca. Participants comprised master's- and doctoral-level students at a CACREP-accredited program who identified as Latine, Spanish-speakers. Through individual interviews, we discovered three themes from the data: (a) personal and professional connection to the study abroad program, (b) developing cultural competence through introspection, self-awareness, and humility, and (c) increasing professional Spanish while embracing nuances. Latine, Spanish-speaking reported growth in their linguistic abilities, self-understanding, and knowledge of Latine cultures. We discuss implications for counselor education study abroad pedagogy and research, as well as how study abroad experiences can promote competence for bilingual counselors.

Significance to the Public

Researchers in counselor education found that study abroad programs can increase clinical effectiveness in students by promoting empathy for those who are culturally different while creating awareness about the importance of contextual factors in multicultural counseling. This study is the first to examine the impact of study abroad experiences with Latine bilingual counselors. Our study abroad program is part of the Bilingual Counseling Certificate, one of four certificates housed within a CACREP-accredited master's program.

Keywords: bilingual counselors, study abroad, language competence, cultural competence, Latinx/Latine

As of July 2021, the Latine community was the largest ethnic minority group in the United States with over 61.4 million people, or 18.5% of the nation's total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Although scholars currently use the terms Latina/o, Latine, and Latinx with this population, we chose the gender-inclusive term "Latine" in reference to individuals living in the United States with ancestry from Spanish-speaking (e.g., Mexico, Cuba, Dominican Republic) and non-Spanish-speaking (e.g., Brazil) South and Central American countries. By 2019, over 41.8 million individuals over 5 years of age spoke Spanish at home, making it the second most spoken language in the United

States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). This shift in national demographics reflects the need for bilingual counselors to provide services for Spanish-speaking clients (Delgado-Romero et al., 2018; Interiano et al., 2021; Trepal et al., 2019). A growing body of conceptual and empirical work indicates that study abroad programs have immense potential to foster growth in multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills, and to foster proficiency in other languages (Barden & Cashwell, 2014; Shannonhouse et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2014). Yet, little is known specifically about bilingual counselors' experiences during study abroad programs. Beyond language translations,

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bilingual counselors must address an array of cultural considerations (e.g., acculturation, anti-Latine political rhetoric) to best serve this growing population (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2021). An exploration of their experiences during a study abroad program can add to the limited body of knowledge on bilingual counseling training and supervision.

Bilingual Counselor Training

As the Latine population continues to grow, the demand for culturally competent bilingual counselors has become a focal point in counseling and bilingual training is incorporated more and more in counseling graduate programs (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2021; McCaffrey & Moody, 2015). Scholars recommend the development of language, multicultural, and social justice competencies as important elements in bilingual counselor training (Interiano et al., 2021; McCaffrey & Moody, 2015). Language competency plays an important role in counseling as communication is a principal tool in our profession. Scholars recommend an understanding of language nuances, language incongruences between Spanish-speaking groups, and translating/expressing general clinical terms in Spanish (Alvarado et al., 2019; Interiano et al., 2021; Trepal et al., 2014). Many bilingual counselors learn their native language early in life at home, while learning and practicing English through an academic context (Alvarado et al., 2019). Unfortunately, formal training and resources for bilingual counselors are scarce based on the implicit yet faulty assumption that students with conversational proficiency in Spanish can easily translate professional concepts obtained in English to their work with Spanish-speaking clients (Alvarado et al., 2019; Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2021; Trepal et al., 2014). Therefore, many bilingual counselors expressed feeling anxious, incompetent, and insecure when counseling in Spanish (Alvarado et al., 2019; Trepal et al., 2014, 2019).

Study Abroad in Counselor Education

Immersion experiences create contact between culturally different people and can range from a few hours to a year (Barden & Cashwell, 2016; Giovanangeli & Oguro, 2016; Harris et al., 2019; Shannonhouse et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2014). Those who have daily exposure to culturally different groups develop greater multicultural competence than those who lack such exposure (Harris et al., 2019). However, exposure alone does not guarantee multicultural competence (Shannonhouse et al., 2018). Study abroad programs are a high contact form of immersion and as such have the potential to foster immense growth in multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills through critical reflection, sustained duration of contact, and the development of meaningful relationships (Shannonhouse et al., 2018).

Few studies have examined the impact of immersion experiences on those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC; Brooks et al., 2019; Goldoni, 2017; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014). Smith-Augustine et al. (2014) found that all “participants expressed a heightened sense of cultural sensitivity or feeling that they were not as culturally sensitive as they had previously thought” (p. 478). Students of color experienced microaggressions while abroad (Brooks et al., 2019; Goldoni, 2017), and Goldoni (2017) found that this disrupted the process of language acquisition, as it discouraged forming bonds with locals after several negative racist experiences. These studies showed the need to examine immersion experiences of BIPOC individuals as they can vary from non-BIPOC counselors. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of bilingual counselors during a 2-week study abroad program to Oaxaca, Mexico. The research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of bilingual counselors through a 2-week study abroad program in Oaxaca, Mexico?

Method

This study was well-suited for a qualitative approach given the exploratory nature of the investigation and our desire to understand a phenomenon of interest, in this case bilingual counselors' experiences through a study abroad program. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand how people make sense of their experiences and arrive at shared meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, we used this method to understand students' meaning-making during their study abroad experience. We followed the transcendental approach of conducting phenomenological research proposed by Moustakas (1994), focusing on the description of bilingual counselors' experiences through the bracketing of the authors' assumptions. We recognized the need to structure and identify our preconceived notions to allow bilingual counselors' voices to emerge (Moustakas, 1994). Due to the second author's participation in the study abroad program, transcendental phenomenology was best-suited to capture bilingual counselors' lived experiences while remaining grounded in the data through discussions and self-reflection.

Study Abroad Program and Curriculum

The Department of Counseling at the University of Texas at San Antonio initiated a 12-hour Bilingual Counseling Certificate in 2016 to develop foundational skills in bilingual counseling with an emphasis on Spanish. A critical component of the Bilingual Counseling Certificate is a 2-week study abroad program in Oaxaca, Mexico. Organized with our host institution, this study abroad program incorporated lessons and immersion experiences to help students: (a) further expand their Spanish language skills, (b) expand on their understanding of indigenous cultures before and after European colonization, (c) analyze Mexico–U.S. relationships and migration from sociocultural and political perspectives, and (d) learn about mental health perspectives valued by indigenous cultures in Mexico. All students participated in daily language

classes to develop Spanish fluency and cultural classes on food, colonialism, and migration. The most powerful learning experiences included visiting a shelter for migrants traveling from Central America to the United States and an overnight stay in a Zapotec village in the mountains where they engaged with town leaders and an indigenous healer. They engaged with the community daily to practice their Spanish while observing and reflecting on cultural differences.

The university faculty utilized a deliberate psychological education (DPE; Sprinthall, 1994) framework to help students integrate their new knowledge and experiences. The DPE consists of five components: (a) new role-taking experience, (b) guided reflection, (c) balance of action with reflection, (d) continuity, and (e) balance of challenge with support. The first component required students to be the outsider in a new environment. The faculty guided the students to self-reflect through many group processing sessions as well as some individual assignments to meet the second component. The third component involved balancing the immersion experiences with adequate time to reflect and process. The faculty monitored the students to assess if they felt overwhelmed or if they were able to integrate their experiences. The fourth component was continuity. Ideally students would be engaged consistently in these processes for 6 to 9 months. It is quite difficult for graduate students to participate in long-term study abroad programs. Thus, we extended the psychological and emotional components of the program by having pre- and post-trip meetings and requiring group projects that allowed students to process and share what they learned with others over the next few months. The final component required the faculty to create experiences that were challenging while providing enough support for the students to engage and integrate the information.

Sampling and Participants

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in 2020, we used convenience and purposeful sampling (Hays & Singh, 2012) to recruit bilingual counselors who attended the study

abroad program in Summer 2017 or 2018. The inclusion criteria encompassed those who were (a) enrolled in either the master's in clinical mental health counseling program, master's in school counseling program, or Ph.D. in counselor education program; (b) attended the study abroad program in 2017 or 2018; and (c) identified as a bilingual counselor.

The final sample consisted of seven participants (six females, one male). Beyond membership of the Latine community, we invited participants to self-identify their nationalities, with some commenting on the complexity of this answer. Participants identified as Mexican Americans ($n = 3$), Mexican Salvadoran ($n = 1$), Mexican-born citizen and naturalized U.S citizen ($n = 1$), Mexican ($n = 1$) and US citizen ($n = 1$). Ages ranged from 27 to 61 years old ($M = 38.14$; $SD = 14.22$). All participants reported Spanish as their first language, learning it at home with family and friends while they learned English in school or work contexts, except for one that learned both English and Spanish in all domains equally. Yet their fluency with each language varied.

Research Team Positionality

Hays and Singh (2012) indicate the essential nature of subjectivity statements is informing readers about the process and context of qualitative research findings. The authors included two counselor educators (first and second author) and a master's student from a CACREP-accredited program (third author), as well as an associate professional clinical counselor in the state of California (fourth author). The first author identifies as a Honduran ciswoman with clinical experience as a counselor providing services in Spanish domestically and internationally, with extensive experience conducting qualitative research. The second author identifies as a White cisgender gay man. He is a counselor educator whose research focuses on promoting the voices of marginalized populations. The first author did not attend the study abroad experience in 2017 and 2018 while the second author did. The third author identifies as a Mexican ciswoman counselor-in-training currently obtaining

bilingual certification in a counseling master's program. The fourth author identifies as a White ciswoman with extensive experience traveling and studying abroad. We acknowledged that we see value in extensive cultural immersion opportunities for students to self-reflect in unfamiliar environments. We recognized a potential threat if we focused solely on our interests and/or did not include challenges as well as areas of improvement for our program. The second author also recognized the importance of separating his experiences and feelings during the study abroad when analyzing those reported by the students. Recognizing our role as instruments in qualitative inquiry, we conducted ongoing weekly debriefing meetings for 3 months to bracket preconceived values and assumptions by discussing our different viewpoints of the data.

Data Collection

After IRB approval, the first and second author invited all bilingual counseling students who participated in the study abroad program through student emails. Data collection occurred in 2021, 3 or 4 years after the participants' study abroad experience. Once students agreed, the fourth author contacted each student to schedule an individual semi-structured interview via Zoom, with follow-up, probing, and/or clarification questions asked as needed. The fourth author conducted all interviews, audio-recorded for verbatim transcription that ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. All participants also completed a demographic form during or before their interview.

We developed interview questions based on the literature on bilingual education and study abroad experiences used in counselor education. We utilized a combination of open- and closed-ended questions so that participants could expand upon existing data or offer new information regarding the critical factors of their experience. In addition, we paid careful attention to constructing the interview questions to minimize researcher bias and to elicit both positive and negative responses to avoid desirable responses. For data collection, we developed an eight-question interview protocol. While developing the protocol we decided to begin

with the following icebreaker to ease participants into the interview: “Please tell me a little about your journey as a counselor or counselor-in-training who speaks both English and Spanish.” We followed with five questions that explored their overall experience in the study abroad program: What interested you to participate in the study abroad program to Oaxaca, Mexico? Please tell me about your experience in the study abroad program to Oaxaca, Mexico? During the study abroad program, what activity did you enjoyed the most? Please explain why. During the study abroad program, what activity did you feel was most beneficial to you as a current or future bilingual counselor serving the Latine community? Please explain why. In your opinion, did the study abroad program contribute to developing knowledge, skills, and awareness to best serve the Latine community? If so, how? To focus on suggestions for improvement we added the following question: What strategies or extra support would you recommend to improve bilingual counselors or counselors-in-training’ experiences in study abroad program to best serve the Latine community? We ended the interview protocol with an open-ended question that allowed participants to share any additional information.

Data Analysis Methods

During the epoche process, we bracketed our biases, judgments, and feelings (Moustakas, 1994) related to the data. We used Van Kaam’s (Moustakas, 1994) method of phenomenological data analysis that requires seven steps that led to three phenomenological reduction processes to identify thematic content (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). First, we individually analyzed transcripts and engaged in horizontalization of meaning units (Hays & Singh, 2012) to code all nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements (meaning units). During this process, we used NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, to improve coding consistency and transparency. Second, we merged all files to determine the invariant constituents through a process of reduction and elimination. This first process of reduction allowed us to determine what was necessary and sufficient data to understand the

phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Following this initial coding, we clustered invariant constituents into themes ensuring that all themes were representative of the participants’ experiences. Using the final codebook, we checked the invariant constituents and their accompanying themes against the complete record of the participants to ensure that we represented their experiences accurately. As a team, we discussed any disagreements and worked on the data until we achieved consensus. This completed the second process of reduction to organize codes into themes. Then we synthesized themes into textural description of participants’ experiences, including verbatim quotes and emotional, social, and cultural connections to create a textural-structural description (Moustakas, 1994). Using the individual textural-structural descriptions, we engaged in the sixth and seventh step (and third reduction process) by creating composite textural and structural descriptions for the entire sample, outlining the reoccurring and prominent themes.

Strategies of Trustworthiness

We engaged in multiple methods of trustworthiness, such as simultaneous data collection and analysis to increase credibility, authenticity, and sample adequacy (Hays & Singh, 2012). All authors participated in weekly meetings for 8 months during the data collection, data analysis, and writing stages. We maintained a reflexive stance throughout the study process and logged different perspectives and understandings of the data on an electronic journal entry. During weekly bracketing meetings we shared our perspectives; reflected upon our positionality, how we approached the study, and the lens through which we viewed the study; and challenged each other allowing the data to speak for itself (Hays & Singh, 2012). Therefore, researcher triangulation was a critical element throughout bracketing meetings, with member checking occurring in two rounds for dependability and confirmability. The first round consisted of sending interview transcripts to participants, while in the second round, participants received copies of the final themes for verification. One participant responded during the second round supporting our

findings. We also had one external auditor, who was a counselor educator with experience with a study abroad program and qualitative research. She agreed that we had grounded our themes in the data and did not have any recommendations for data analysis. She did, however, ask us to specify the extent to which the language and cultural competence development were based on the study abroad as opposed to the broader bilingual counseling certificate program.

Findings

Our analysis generated three themes: (a) *personal and professional connection to the study abroad program*, (b) *developing cultural competence through introspection, self-awareness, and humility*, and (c) *increasing professional Spanish while embracing nuances*. We present the three themes accompanied by subthemes and use pseudonyms for participants.

Personal and Professional Connection to the Study Abroad Program

All participants shared background information that provided context to their personal and professional connection to the study abroad program. We divided their experiences into two subthemes: (a) *connection, pride, and appreciation for Mexican or Latin American culture* and (b) *recognized need for bilingual counselors and professional preparation*.

Connection, Pride, and Appreciation for Mexican or Latin American Culture

Most participants ($n = 6$) discussed the importance of their connection to the Latine community. Peregrina mentioned that she considers herself “Mexican” because “my roots are in Mexico,” while the United States was “my new house.” Francesca was born in Mexico and moved to the United States older in life to pursue her master’s degree in clinical mental health counseling. These ties to Latine culture impacted their personal connection to certain cultural or sociopolitical struggles observed

and discussed during their trip. Fernanda shared that her father was from Central America and how this personal connection to the immigrant journey led to feelings of anger and sadness, while also feeling grateful for the reminder of some beautiful aspects of Mexican culture, such as “the slowing down of life there.” She described how it was “pretty difficult to compartmentalize” when they visited the immigrant shelter. She noted it was a “very highly emotional day” and “extremely personal” because “I guess the stories that we heard were very similar to stories that I had heard of my family members.” Fernanda shared she is now “incredibly invested in social justice and immigration reform.”

These connections created validation, reconnection, and a sense of pride for students throughout the study abroad. “It was a very emotional experience in which I was also able to recognize my attachment to Mexico and my struggles as an immigrant in the U.S.,” expressed Francesca. Emilia explained, “It was just so beautiful and so powerful to see those people [colleagues and professors] experience my culture.... They were so excited to be there, and it was really inspiring for me to see them experience that.” Anna echoed these sentiments, stating, “It just also made me appreciate like where I come from.” Therefore, it seemed that participants experienced a deeper connection to the study abroad program because it required them to explore their own culture.

Recognized Need for Bilingual Counselors and Professional Preparation

Due to their connection to the Latine communities, many of our participants expressed an interest in working with this population before the study abroad. Six participants recognized the need for bilingual counselors and their professional preparation. Emilia wondered what counseling a Spanish-speaking client would look like “since all my exposure was to classes in English and all these theories, and then starting with skills and practicing those skills.” She assumed that “it was going to be

the same as me just speaking, as me just having a conversation.” It was not long before Emilia recognized that “in reality, it isn’t, right?” Often students reported a lack of exposure, training, and support in their counselor preparation. Fernanda did not receive any practice in her master’s program and had to do “a lot of like self-learning.” Valeria, a doctoral student and a licensed professional counselor associate, expressed, “I was kinda thrown into the concept of bilingual counseling. I didn’t have any training.... I didn’t know how to translate certain words.” Likewise, Francesca recognized “I had a lot to learn.”

Therefore, participants intentionally sought out programs that provided additional training. Peregrina stated, “This is the main reason I joined the Department of Counseling at the University of Texas at San Antonio, because they offered the bilingual program” and thus helped her “do pretty good with my community, the Spanish speakers.” Thus, when students found out about the study abroad program, many expressed immediate interest and being “thankful,” as expressed by Valeria.

Developing Cultural Competence Through Introspection, Self-Awareness, and Humility

All participants spoke about how their experiences in the study abroad helped them develop cultural competence as bilingual counselors. They detailed their cultural competence development in two main areas: (a) *building more self-awareness as bicultural individuals*, and (b) *developing cultural awareness, humility, and a desire for advocacy*.

Building More Self-Awareness as Bicultural Individuals

As reported in the Method section, all participants had connections to Mexico or Latin America. Therefore, five participants shared how introspection throughout the study abroad program seemed to create more self-awareness and an understanding of how important introspection was to their development as counselors. Ana shared that

“more than anything, self-awareness ... the program definitely makes you take a step back and helps you be self-aware of a lot of things.”

Increased self-awareness seemed to also crystalize their understanding regarding privilege, oppression, and intersectionality as bilingual counselors. Ana explained that her increased self-awareness allowed her to “know that I have privileges.... It was a humbling experience, for sure.” Francesca recalls a similar realization during an important conversation:

I will remember conversations about color blindness. A difficult and uncomfortable conversation considering the color of our skin ... how they’ve experienced certain discrimination growing up. I also became very reflective of my own privilege as fairly fair, white-skinned Mexicana.... So that was really revealing for all of us like finding our own identity. There were some discussions about people that would say ‘You know, oh, no, like ethnicity or race does not make a difference,’ and then some of us would be stepping up like, ‘Hey, no, it does, and we need to accept that it’s an ongoing situation.’”

Periods for reflections challenged their own “judgments or preconceived notions,” as stated by Francesca. Fernanda stated, “they had us work a lot on ourselves right.” She continued, “I didn’t know that when I went, I was going to learn more about myself (laughs). I thought it was going to be me learning more about other things.”

Developing Cultural Awareness, Humility, and a Desire for Advocacy

Developing cultural awareness, humility, and a desire for advocacy among all participants centered around a better understanding of cultural differences within Latine communities, cultural considerations regarding diagnosis, immigration, and non-Western ideologies of healing such as *curanderismo* – a healing system that holistically treats disorders through religious, spiritual, and health-related means commonly practiced in Latin American countries. Francesca expressed how the study abroad was “a great opportunity to understand my

country from a more diverse environment in regard to the cultures within cultures that exist there.” Ana expanded on cultural within-group differences in Oaxaca, stating, “Just because I speak Spanish, and just because I’m Mexican American, that doesn’t make my culture similar to the other person.” Peregrina explained that she felt sad when friends expressed a one-dimensional view of biculturalism and bilingualism. Comments such as “you are already a Spanish-speaker, you already know the culture” dismissed her efforts to deepen her cultural and linguistic understanding. She further explained, “Mexico, will have different parts of the culture, different foods, even different music. And then when you start moving into Central America, South America, all these things look different even though we are Latinos.” Valeria excitedly shared, “I can learn so much from my clients by just asking them, ‘What is important to you?’ Like in your family, what do you celebrate?”

Regardless of their reported growth in cultural awareness, participants recognized the importance of remaining humble. “Once you say, ‘Oh, I know everything,’ you’re in trouble,” expressed Emilia. When Peregrina discussed why this trip was “life-changing” to her, she explained that although she had friends who stated that she did not need to take “extra classes to do the bilingual program” because she was already a Spanish speaker born in Mexico, she felt that “it [study abroad] changed my way of thinking as a person and even more as a counselor.” Their disposition to remain “open-minded,” as stated by Peregrina, fostered a curious mindset regarding diagnosis and healing, at times, challenging Euro-American/Western counseling paradigms. Students met with a curandera, known as a spiritual healer among Latine. Many spoke about how interacting with the curandera, and some even receiving a *limpia* (healing) from her, allowed them to consider how counselors can pathologize non-Western practices and beliefs. Ana stated, “I feel like that just helps reinforce that people interpret healing in different ways and be respectful of that.” Valeria added that her experience receiving a *limpia* challenged her to be respectful of other forms of healing and the possible efficacy. She admitted that when the curandera told her exactly

what was bothering her, she recalled “looking at one of my friends and just my jaw dropping like, ‘How would she know that?’ In that moment I was like, ‘Okay, maybe I need to not think of this as a joking thing.’”

Yet, when asked about the most illuminating part of the trip, an excursion to an immigration shelter topped their experience at the Zapotec village. Peregrina recalled, “You see the reality of life for some people that you don’t even imagine.... That day it was, *el día fue muy sombrio*, like dark.... It was one of the most memorable days for me.” As Fernanda explained, this experience was not only emotionally memorable, but it also “humanized the immigrant experience” and clarified how “the Latinx experience might be rooted in classism, colorism, and um racism.” Emilia also learned the importance of asking questions such as, “What was it like having to start all over again?” due to her conversations with immigrating Latine.

Therefore, five participants discussed how experiences and conversations during the study abroad fostered a passion for advocacy. Emilia shared that when she took a counseling job after graduating, she realized “how much there is a need, especially in the community here, for Spanish-speaking counselors.” She added, “I’m constantly advocating for at work ... having all that paperwork in Spanish and having that accessible person that can speak to them and of course, having a counselor.” Fernanda echoed that visiting an immigration shelter in Oaxaca was a good reminder of the “importance of advocacy within counseling. Even though it was very painful ... it just really validated the importance of the work that I do.”

Increasing Professional Spanish While Embracing Nuances

All participants explained how their experiences in the study abroad aided their proficiency in Spanish in both formal and informal settings. At the same time, this experience helped them recognize the nuances of the language that inform their work with Latine clients. They detailed their language development in two main areas: (a) *improved*

language proficiency in Spanish and its variations, and (b) increased knowledge of clinical terminology in Spanish.

Improved Proficiency in Spanish and its Variations

Six participants stated that the study abroad provided opportunities for them to practice their Spanish that improved their proficiency in the language in several ways. Although most bilingual counselors identified Spanish as their first language, many also spoke of the difficulty of navigating both languages. Peregrina explained how switching between languages created “difficulties because, what words should I use? I forget what I was going to say, so I’m not sure if I say it in English or Spanish.” Some of the students only spoke Spanish with family members and lacked opportunities to speak the language in professional settings. Valeria expanded on this topic by saying, “It is my second language. I never felt like really confident. It was more just something that I use to communicate with family.” Therefore, the study abroad allowed Valeria “to speak Spanish consistently” in a different setting. Fernanda explained how this happened for her, even with Spanish as her first language, stating, “I’d had no problem, you know, communicating with the people there, but being able to tweak some of the grammar, the syntax, uh that was helpful for me.” Ana echoed how the duration of the immersion aided her Spanish, stating, “The study abroad program, it really helped as far as my Spanish. I mean, at home I don’t get to practice that a lot. But when I was in Oaxaca, I was just speaking Spanish for 2 weeks.”

Emilia also spoke about the nuances of Spanish language that changed from country to country, stating, “Every Spanish is different ... every person that you speak to, even if they speak Spanish, and I speak Spanish, our culture is completely different.” Sebastian shared that although “we all use different forms of communications, ... there’s a few words here and there that may be different.” He shared that “traveling to that particular region helped me to absorb the intricacies of the language” even though Spanish was his first language, “because there’s still

a lot of native Mexican Indians there who don’t speak Spanish themselves.... It brightened my terminology in Spanish, and I learned different ways of how people express themselves and communicate.”

Valeria shared that a more in-depth understanding of language nuances through the study abroad program made her “prepared for conversations like that because I knew kind of where to go with the conversation.” She explained:

I know with one client, um, in particular, she was from Peru. I would have normally felt very intimidated by the fact that our Spanish was different. Instead, after experiencing this trip, I realized that my Spanish doesn’t have to be perfect. I realized with this person, just being very open at the beginning and asking her, like, “I’m not familiar with that word. What does that mean?” Or even when she would say something, like, “Explain that to me. What does that look like back home?”

She shared that her client was “moved to tears” and said, “It just makes me so happy to be able to share something that meant so much to me when I lived in Peru with someone.”

Increased Knowledge of Clinical Terminology in Spanish

Five participants also discussed how the study abroad increased their knowledge of clinical terminology in Spanish. Emilia explained that taking a “dictionary of Spanish terms” and “translating them from English to Spanish” helped in their development. “Because a lot of the times we don’t have that.... How do you say? ... What’s the word? I’m trying to find a word that’s difficult to translate. Like, even *grief*. How do you say *stages of grief*?”

Fernanda echoed that she had not “had that many opportunities to use my Spanish as a clinician... It [study abroad] helps with my overall confidence in the language and, um, just making sure that I was just refining it.” Valeria shared that talking to others “normalized ... the idea that not a lot translates to

Spanish as well.” She shared that having other people share “yeah, I experience the same thing, and ... Spanish is my first language” helped her realize, “Okay, I’m not terrible at this. It is hard.” She added:

I was kinda thrown into the whole concept of bilingual counseling, and at the time it was really tiresome.... I didn’t know how to translate certain words from counseling into Spanish for my clients.... I would say that it was great to be able to be in a setting where I was able to speak Spanish so much ... so, this was really an opportunity to just constantly be talking to different people, having to speak Spanish.... I feel so much more confident in terms of working with clients now because I do use it more. I mean, even when I got back from this trip.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of bilingual counselors during a 2-week study abroad program to Oaxaca, Mexico. Scholars agree with the need to increase bilingual training opportunities to increase students’ abilities to provide culturally competent services in Spanish (Alvarado et al., 2019; Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2021; Trepal et al., 2014). A study abroad program, such as the one described in this study, can be an answer to this crucial need. As indicated by our participants, bilingual counselors desire more specialized training opportunities to work with this population. The findings of this study show that bilingual counselors’ personal and professional connection to the Latine community influenced their desire to attend the program and their recognition of the need for more culturally and linguistically competent counselors. Researchers in counselor education agree that study abroad programs can increase clinical effectiveness in students by promoting empathy for those who are culturally different (Barden & Cashwell, 2014; Giovanangeli & Oguro, 2016; Harris et al., 2019; Santos Dietz & Baker, 2018; Shannonhouse et al., 2018; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014). Specific

studies argue the need to foster cultural immersion experiences with BIPOC individuals (Brooks et al., 2019; Goldoni, 2017; Smith-Augustine et al., 2014). This study indicated that equally powerful and meaningful insight can occur when we invite students to explore their culture through a study abroad program.

The power of immersion experiences, even within a culture with which students have a strong connection, is evident in our findings. Researchers on bilingual education speak to the need to develop cultural competency when working with Spanish-speaking Latine clients. Our participants shared their surprise about how much the study abroad program helped them build more self-awareness as bicultural individuals and develop cultural awareness, humility, and a desire for advocacy. Creating a high contact form of immersion fostered immense growth in multicultural awareness, knowledge, skills, and advocacy through critical reflection, sustained duration of contact, and the development of meaningful relationships for the bilingual counselors who participated in this program. These findings supported earlier research on the impact of cultural immersion experiences among counselors (Barden & Cashwell, 2016; Shannonhouse et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2014). These experiences allowed bilingual counselors to consider not only the impact of institutional racism of the United States, but the impact of colonialism in countries from which many Latine clients originate. These observations led to more awareness of privilege and oppression that they had been blind to in the United States. For our participants, engaging in this study abroad improved their cultural competence by helping them to better “see” their culture.

Exposure to language nuances and incongruences between Spanish-speaking groups, and translating/expressing general clinical terms in Spanish is necessary for bilingual counselors-in-training (Alvarado et al., 2019; Interiano et al., 2021; Trepal et al., 2014). Having opportunities for students to engage in sustained language immersion in the context of their chosen profession helped build language competence and confidence even

when proficiency was lacking in some areas. Students saw that the ability to connect and build rapport through Spanish language could bridge ruptures in communication. This, in turn, lowered their level of anxiety regarding providing services in Spanish. Trepal et al. (2014) found that higher levels of language anxiety can diminish self-efficacy among bilingual counselors. Goldoni (2017) shared how racism impeded language acquisition and discouraged forming bonds with locals. Therefore, positive cultural immersion experiences can promote language acquisition and proficiency among counselors. As a result, promoting study abroad programs designed to increase cultural and language competence among bilingual counselors can address training needs that help promote the use of the Spanish language in counseling professional contexts.

Implications for Counselor Educators and Supervisors

The findings of this study clearly support the use of immersion experiences for helping counselors-in-training gain levels of awareness that would be difficult if not impossible to replicate in a classroom setting. Counselor educators may consider designing local immersion experiences when study abroad options are not available. As for preparing counselors who are bilingual in Spanish, study abroad in a Spanish-speaking country may help students learn intricacies of the culture while holding up a mirror so that they can better understand their own cultural assumptions. Further, immersion alone may not be sufficient to help students make sense of their experiences as they relate to counseling. Counselor educators would do well to lead immersion experiences, providing ample time and opportunities for guided reflection. A DPE framework can help counselor educators engage students appropriately at a level where they are most likely to benefit. Reflecting the continuity component of the DPE, our participants were engaged in a bilingual counseling certificate program, which exposed them to relevant cultural and linguistic education both before and after the trip. Providing ample post-immersion opportunities

for students to process what they learned as it relates to their work as counselors can help them integrate the new information into their practice.

Limitations and Future Directions

These findings offer insight into the sustained influence of the international immersion experience of bilingual counselors. Nevertheless, it is important to consider our findings within the context of study limitations. Limitations of this study include sampling, time, and additional bilingual training. Given the research methodology and inclusion criteria for participants, the purposive convenience sample included only participants identifying as Latine from one university in the southwest region of the United States. Considering that all participants were volunteers and responding to issues such as language and cultural competence, social desirability is a potential limitation. Although we incorporated several strategies of trustworthiness, the first author and second author are faculty leading the study abroad experience, thus researcher bias may have affected the study. The interviews also took place 2 to 3 years after the participants' study abroad experience. Conducting the study years after their trip emphasizes the long-term impact of the study abroad on bilingual counselors' personal and professional development. However, recalling memories or emotions could have diminished with time. Finally, the study abroad program is part of the bilingual counseling certificate. Although we carefully focused on participants' experiences during the study abroad, we recognize that their language and cultural competence development is also a product of their broader training experiences.

Additional research is warranted to further understand the effect of immersion experiences on bilingual counselors' development. Findings from the current study suggest that bilingual counselors who participated in the study abroad program experienced varying degrees of sustained change, both personally and professionally. However, individual differences that emerged from the data, such as level of Spanish language proficiency, illustrate the need for future researchers to include

more diverse samples to replicate and extend these findings. Last, considering that most of the research on the impact of immersion experiences has been qualitative, this body of literature would greatly benefit from mixed methods or quantitative research designs. For example, a pretest–posttest experimental design would increase understanding of the changes attributed to the immersion experience, specifically on concepts such as cultural humility. By integrating mixed methods or quantitative components with immersion and its relationship to counselor development, researchers may increase the generalizability of the results. As many counselor education programs may not have the resources to provide study abroad opportunities, we also suggest future researchers consider exploring collaborations between programs or across disciplines, as well as the efficacy of providing local immersions with Spanish-speaking populations, to assist bilingual counselors' development with language and cultural competence.

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